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Address: Hadoram Shirihai, International Birdwatching Centre of Eilat, PO Box 4168, Eilat 88102, Israel.

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A new subspecies of *Pytilia melba* from Djibouti, East Africa

by G. R. Welch & Hilary J. Welch

Received 12 August 1987

During the course of the Djibouti II Autumn '85 Expedition, 4 days were spent in the Mabla mountains, 25 km west of Obock, primarily searching for the endemic Djibouti Francolin *Francolinus ochropectus*, but also surveying all the birdlife of this previously undocumented region.

On 17 November, in the region of the village of Goula (11°57'N, 43°00'E), 4 birds were encountered which resembled Green-winged *Pytilia melba* but differed in several plumage characters. Photographs of a male were obtained the following day, along with additional notes on plumage, voice and habitat. On 23 November at least 8 birds resembling those observed on Mabla were found in Tôha (11°47'N, 42°43'E), a large wadi on the southern edge of the Forêt du Day, with an additional 3 birds at the junction of the Randa–Bankoualé road (11°50'N, 42°42'E) on 24 November. In both cases more photographs of males were obtained.

Following the expedition's return to Britain, these photographs were compared with skins of *P. melba* in the British Museum (Natural History), Tring (BMNH) and copies of the description of the Djibouti birds sent for comment to Derek Goodwin and Jurgen Nicolai, both of whom are well acquainted with the genus. From these researches, it would appear that the birds in Djibouti constitute a new subspecies of *P. melba* and a detailed description has been published in the Djibouti II Report (Welch *et al.* 1986: 111–118) and photographs of the holotype and paratypes are lodged in the Photographic Library of the BMNH—reference nos PL2001.1, 2002.1, 2003.1 and 2003.2. There we have proposed the name

***Pytilia melba flavicaudata* subsp. nov.**

It differs from all other races of *P. melba* (see Appendix) in totally lacking red in the plumage; the face, rump and tail of males are all a bright golden yellow. In all other respects the birds resemble *P. m. jessei*, the race which occurs in neighbouring Ethiopia. To date there is no biometric data available on this subspecies, but it appears likely that it has arisen as the result of a yellow morph becoming genetically fixed in the population.

In 1985 all the birds were found in the same type of habitat—mixed *Acacia mellifera*/*Rhigozum somalense* 'scrub', with numerous taller *Acacia seyal*, and it appeared that the birds were dependent on this species mixture. However, in March 1987 a brief return visit was made to Tôha and at least 2 *P. m. flavicaudata* were seen in a different section of the wadi. On this occasion they were frequenting gardens in the region of the native-style tourist village at Dittilou (11°47'N, 42°42'E) and the neighbouring side wadi. Although both *A. mellifera* and *R. somalense* were present in the general area, neither appeared to be of particular importance to the birds.

It is interesting to note that the 2 regions where *flavicaudata* occurs are also those areas where the endemic *F. ochropectus* is also found. It is therefore possible that the 2 species became isolated from their nearest relatives at the same time and have evolved side by side. Until biometric data and, more importantly, behavioural information is available for *flavicaudata*, its taxonomic origin and status must remain unconfirmed.

Acknowledgements

Djibouti II was GRW's sabbatical project for the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, who also helped sponsor the expedition. Other sponsorship was provided by the Fauna and Flora Preservation Society, the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, the Ornithological Society of the Middle East, the Worldwide Fund for Nature and the World Pheasant Association. Work in Djibouti was authorised by the Institut Supérieur d'Etudes et de Recherches Scientifiques et Techniques and 4-wheel drive transport was provided by Ets Marill. Stephanie Coghlan assisted in the field during this phase of the work. To all we extend our grateful thanks.

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APPENDIX

Description of the Holotype (Welch *et al.* 1986: 114)

Although no specimens were collected, a series of 4 photographs of 3 different males was obtained and these are registered at the BMNH Photographic Library, reference no. PL2001.1. Photographed near Goula, Djibouti (11°57'N, 43°00'E) at 565 m, 17 November 1985, by G. R. & H. J. Welch.

Crown, nape, rear half of ear coverts, hindneck, mantle and lores grey, the grey on the mantle gradually shading into the dull greeny-brown of the scapulars, back and wings. Forehead, chin, throat, frontal half of ear coverts, sides of neck and upper breast bright golden yellow. Lower breast, belly and vent white. Underparts marked with fine black barring from the upper breast to lower belly, the barring becoming coarser and broader on the lower belly and flanks but absent from vent. Tail rich golden yellow, only slightly duller than face. Greenish central tail feathers and very bright yellow outer tail feathers. Bill pinkish with grey culmen, legs pink, iris deep red.

Female (not photographed), similar to the male but with the yellow of the face and upper breast replaced by pale grey, the tail slightly duller yellow and the wings a brighter shade of green.

Paratypes (photographs only): male, Tôha (c. 500 m a.s.l.), BMNH reference no. PL2002.1; male Bankoualé junction on the Tadjoura to Randa road (c. 700 m a.s.l.), PL2003.1.

As a subspecies of Green-winged Pytilia, the common English name of Djibouti Green-winged Pytilia is suggested. However, should these birds be found to constitute a new species, the name Yellow-tailed Pytilia would be more appropriate.

Address: G. R. & Hilary J. Welch, 21a East Delph, Whittlesey, Cambridgeshire PE7 1RH

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Notiochelidon flavipes; a swallow new to Venezuela

by Miguel Lentino R.

Received 12 August 1987

Although most species of swallows are widely distributed, several only occur in rather restricted habitats. The Pale-footed Swallow *Notiochelidon flavipes* inhabits a narrow altitudinal fringe in the cloud forests of the Andes (Parker *et al.* 1980) and has been reported from the Cauca Valley in Colombia south to Peru and northern Bolivia (Meyer de Schauensee 1982, Parker & O'Neill 1980, Parker *et al.* 1980, Parker & Rowlett 1984, Parker *et al.* 1985). In this note I present the first sightings and collection of the Pale-footed Swallow in Venezuela, records which considerably extend the northern limits of its range.

The species was originally recorded in August 1985 in the city of Merida, State of Merida, by K. Kauffmann, C. Parrish and A. Altman, bird-watchers who identified it by its song, flight pattern and coloration. Between 23 and 28 December of the same year in Betania, Páramo de Tamá, State Táchira (07°26'N, 72°25'W) I observed several groups of 10–15 individuals of *N. flavipes* foraging over man-made clearings within the cloud forest. At times they were seen together with *N. murina*. One specimen of *N. flavipes* was collected and is currently deposited in the Colección Ornitológica Phelps, Caracas (label number 75731). The specimen is an immature male. Its testes were only slightly developed (1.5 × 0.5 mm), the cranium was not completely ossified, the bill was black with yellow gape, the iris was brown, and the feet, tarsi and mouth lining were pinkish-flesh. Body weight was 7.4 gm. The plumage, which seemed to be fresh, was in good condition. Coloration was similar to that described by Chapman (1922), Meyer de Schauensee (1946) and Zimmer (1955), except that the under tail coverts had pale (or white) clear edges. This characteristic is also present in juveniles of *N. murina meridensis* (3 specimens examined), nominate *N. cyanoleuca* (11), *Atticora melanoleuca* (4) and *A. fasciata* (7). Parker & O'Neill (1980) correctly point out that *N. flavipes* is easily confused with *N. cyanoleuca*, which is a possible reason why it might have been overlooked previously in Venezuela.